Insights: Alerts

FDA's Public Meeting on the Use of the Term "Healthy" in the Labeling of Human Food Products

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On March 9, 2017, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA or Agency) held a public meeting in Rockville, MD, which FDA officials described as a way to engage in a dialog with the public and regulated industry and allow for opportunity to ask questions on how to redefine the term "healthy." In the opening remarks, FDA noted that the food landscape has shifted from being "nutrient-focused" to more of a "food-based" focus, and that the current regulation for the use of the term "healthy" was issued in the early 1990s at a time when food science was focused on limiting total fat intake and on ensuring that consumers were able to meet certain nutritional deficiencies that were identified to be of concern at that time (e.g., Vitamins C and A).

As science has evolved, the focus has shifted from total fat reduction to encouraging consumers to eat certain types of fats and deficiencies in Vitamin D and potassium intake. With the modernization of the Nutrition Facts panel and serving size regulations to reflect more current science, FDA is seeking to, among other things, determine how to align the use of the term "healthy" with those recent changes.

The first part of the public meeting consisted of two panel discussions that focused on consumer attitudes, beliefs, and behavior and provided stakeholders with an opportunity to share their perspectives on how "healthy" should be defined. The second half of the meeting consisted of breakout sessions covering the following three topics: 1) Healthy as a nutrient-based claim; 2) Healthy as a food component-based claim; and 3) Consumer meaning and understanding of the term Healthy. The meeting ended with presentations from interested members of the public and industry.

The major takeaways from the meeting were as follows:

- There is support for FDA to redefine the definition of "healthy," but it is not clear what that definition should be.
- Most participants agreed that a definition that is both nutrient-based and food component-based may be the most appropriate.
- There are some members of the public and industry who believe that the FDA should eliminate the claim "healthy."
- Consumers are influenced by claims on food labels; however, their attitudes and perceptions vary widely and as such, the term may mean different things to different people.
- Food/Nutrition messaging should be consistent among government agencies (USDA / FDA).
- Consumers need more education with regard to what makes a product "healthy."
- FDA should consider the use of the MyPlate icon on food labels to assist consumers in making better food

choices.

- The industry should play a role in helping shape the definition of “healthy.”
- FDA does not have a specific timeline for deciding whether and how to redefine the term “healthy.”

For a more detailed summary of the meeting, please click here.